

Richard Cohen

What Did Bush Know?

Iran-contra prosecutor Lawrence Walsh, having spent six years and \$32.5 million, has announced that he's winding it up. This 80-year-old man ends his investigation (but not some pending trials) having lost more than he's won and, it seems safe to say, with a nation almost totally uninterested in his task. Maybe that explains why the basic question about George Bush will probably never be answered: What did he know, when did he know it, and why can't he get his story straight?

It's probably something of an impertinence to suggest that Bush has not been on the level about Iran-contra. After all, we are supposed to be preoccupied with how Bill Clinton conducted himself during the Vietnam War and whether he has been candid about his actions. These are serious matters. But they are not so serious that what George Bush did just six years ago—and not as a college kid, either—doesn't matter or why, to get right down to it, he's avoided scrutiny for a story so implausible it would have your average teenager grounded for a week.

Bush's initial position was that as vice president he was the personification of the three monkeys: No evil did he hear, see or speak. He was, as he put it, "not in the loop." And while it might well be that arms were traded for hostages and other nefarious plots were hatched from Oliver North's White House office, Bush himself knew next to nothing about it. In his 1987 campaign biography, "Looking Forward," Bush wrote that it was only after the Iran-contra operation was history that he got his "first real chance to see the picture as a whole." Up until then, he wrote, he had been—you guessed it—"out of the loop."

But my colleague Walter Pincus has counted some 36 times that Bush attended presidential briefings during 1986, when the topic du jour was Iran, hostages and arms sales to the contras. And in 1987, Bush told another of my colleagues, David Broder, that one reason he did not object to the swap of arms for hostages (for that, in essence, is what transpired), was that neither Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger nor Secretary of State George Shultz had done so. "If I had sat there and heard George Shultz and Caspar express it [an objection] strongly, maybe I would have had a stronger view. But when you don't know something, it's hard to react . . ." In that muddled syntax can be heard the muted bleat of a

sheep.

But if Bush didn't react, Shultz and Weinberger most certainly did—and with apparent outrage. Bush's characterization of them was patently false. They had forcefully objected to the arms sale. For that reason, an incredulous Weinberger called Shultz the day the Broder story appeared to, it seems, sputter his dismay. "He [Bush] was on the other side," Shultz quoted Weinberger as saying. "It's on the record. Why did he say that?" (Shultz dictated his recollection to an aide, and this record of the conversation is in the hands of the independent prosecutor.)

Yes, why indeed? It could be that Bush was convinced, with good reason, that the American public will continue to see Iran-contra as the policy equivalent of quantum physics—hopelessly complicated and of interest only to specialists. Second, he might have relied on the American press to become bored with a story that does not immediately hit pay dirt. And last, Bush is a team-player sort of guy. He played dummy for Reagan; he expected others to do the same for him. He has not been disappointed.

Whatever the reason, Bush's insistence that he was merely playing piano in the bordello we call Iran-contra doesn't merely stretch credulity, it shreds it. His own national security adviser at the time, Donald P. Gregg, was familiar with some details of the operation—details, Gregg insisted, he withheld from Bush. And Ollie North, Mr. Contra himself, had left notes referring to Bush in the dewy-eyed way North reserved for compadres in the cause. Bush, in short, managed to be outside while being at the very center of it. The president, it seems, is not a quick study.

It's not necessary to consider the Iran-contra affair a scandal to suspect Bush of not telling the truth about it. It's not even necessary to think anyone's a crook to suspect that Bush's answers have been less than straight. The evidence, circumstantial to be sure but persuasive nonetheless, suggests that when Bush says the difference between him and Clinton is that ephemeral quality called trust, he is, regrettably and ironically, on familiar ground: out of the loop once more.